

OBJECTIONS
TO
ANIMAL MAGNETISM,
OR,
MESMERISM,
WITH REMARKS ON
MR. SPENCER HALL'S LECTURES.

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PREFACE.

The subject of Animal Magnetism, or Mesmerism, having excited much notice and elicited considerable inquiry, more particularly of late by the introduction into the town of popular lectures and experiments; it has been thought desirable that the members of the Medical Profession should express an opinion as to the truth or falsehood of the assertions and theories advanced by the cultivators of the subject.

The most important considerations respecting Mesmerism, are; first—Are the so-called facts, unhesitatingly advanced by its advocates, supported by sufficient testimony to warrant our belief in them as true? and, secondly,—Supposing them to be all, or in part, genuine, are they to be explained by other laws of the animal economy already understood, without the necessity of giving our faith to an intangible thing like Mesmerism, which no one of its professors has hitherto attempted to define, and which is only vaguely apprehended by the public as something capable of explaining all the mysteries of our organization?

Some years ago the writer of the following remarks witnessed the experiments of Baron Dupotet with Dr. Elliotson at University College Hospital. From what he then saw, he was induced to think unfavorably of the matter; since that period, however, many novel experiments have been

tried, much has been said and written on both sides of the question. Mesmerism has, in fact, become a popular subject, taken up with much warmth and zeal by many, and particularly by non-professional persons.

Credulity, and the love of novelty, so natural to the human mind, or the want of acquaintance with the laws of the animal economy, may very readily account for this circumstance. But the medical man, acquainted with the anatomical construction—the physiological laws which govern the human system—in the daily habit also of witnessing the varied, wonderful, and, to the uneducated mind, anomalous workings of the human frame, becomes daily more convinced of the order and harmony existing in the great master-piece of creation; and the less likely is he to be led astray by the novelties and mysteries of a strange doctrine, such as Mesmerism.

Thus it is that comparatively few among the Medical Profession have given any credence whatever to the marvels of the mesmeric professors.

The author trusts that the following remarks will be viewed with that spirit of liberality, which he accords to those who may differ from him; his object being merely to throw light upon a subject, apparently involved in great obscurity; very liable as he believes to deceive the inexperienced and unwary,—and tending to produce evil rather than good to the community.

5, CASTLE ST. READING,
June 2nd, 1845.

OBJECTIONS TO ANIMAL MAGNETISM.

IT would be difficult to meet with any theory or doctrine, whether propounded in past ages or just starting fresh into existence, with which a certain portion of truth was not blended. This spark of truth is generally set prominently forth, what is less plausible is next presented, our interest or our passions are excited till the mind becomes dazzled, and at length is taken captive; error, thus dressed up and leavened with truth, frequently becomes mistaken for truth itself. When the most adverse doctrines are maintained by different parties, it is necessary, in order to arrive at the truth, to examine every fact adduced, weigh every argument, sift every proposition, compare one part with another, and see if the individual parts harmonize together as a whole.

We must ascertain if there be anything advanced not in accordance with reason and truth, and at variance with all previously known and admitted laws.—Let us examine the pretensions of Mesmerism, and ascertain how far they will bear these tests.

Certain persons, under particular circumstances, are said to be susceptible to certain peculiar impressions produced on them from without, the impressions themselves, and the actions resulting therefrom, constituting what is termed Animal Magnetism, or Mesmerism. It is admitted by the mesmerists themselves, that certain individuals only, and those comparatively few, are influenced by this agent.

Now, if the active principle of Mesmerism be a fluid, or something having a distinct or separate existence,—since all mankind, each and every being of the species, is made up of the same materials, the solids and fluids of the body doubtlessly eliminated from the same elements, then all persons would alike in a greater or less degree become affected by the mesmeric influence.

The mesmerist admits that the subject mesmerised requires a preparation before the manifestations of the science can develop themselves, hence is implied a previous communication between the two parties, and even if there be no actual collusion, yet a certain degree of sympathy must exist between the patient and operator. Thus Mesmerism will not bear a comparison with any of the known agents of which science takes cognizance, whether applied in the way of

remedy or for experiment; for instance,—Opium, in a sufficient dose, will procure sleep in half an hour,—Tartar Emetic or Ipceacuanha excite vomiting in ten minutes,—Prussic Acid, in the course of a few seconds, will effect coma and suspend the action of the heart, and Electricity excite a shock in an inappreciable space of time, and so on: it matters not under what circumstances these several agents are applied, their effects are universally and unequivocally the same; or if there are exceptions in degree they are all ascertainable and come under definite laws—On the contrary the mesmeric influence or fluid, as it is termed, affects different subjects in very different degrees, and the vast majority, as I have already said, are not at all affected by it, neither do the different so-called facts, and the immense number of exceptions, come under any clearly defined and recognisable law.

An argument in favor of Mesmerism made use of by Mr. Speneer Hall and others, is the following—that nature, ever beneficent, never sends an evil without a correspondent good, or, in other words, a disease without a remedy, and that there are many diseases, incurable by ordinary means, which are destined to yield to the influence of Mesmerism. This argument is utterly worthless unless supported by demon-

strable facts. It might be taken as justly as in the case of Mesmerism, for the support of any new theory however unreal or visionary. The most that the argument is worth (even granting its truth) is, that it leads us to seek new fields of investigation, but it does not in any way vouch for their truth or value. Let us examine the nature of disease and see if Mesmerism is at all adequate to relieve or remove structural changes of a morbid kind. The eye, or the ear, or any other of the organs, may lose irretrievably the functions allotted to them,—mechanical pressure on the optic nerve may produce incurable blindness,—a slight lesion of the auricular apparatus may bring on confirmed deafness,—effused blood pressing on nervous matter may induce Paralysis of either of the limbs,—or a foreign body from without, or an adventitious structure from within, may insinuate itself accidentally into the air passages or blood vessels, and cause unsuspected but inevitable death. By the inspection of diseased parts after death these facts may be clearly demonstrated, and we further learn that before a cure can possibly be obtained, certain physical changes must take place in the parts affected with disease. Now Mesmerism pretends to effect more than all hitherto known remedies have been able to accomplish ; for in-

stance—the cure of paralysis, loss of sight, hearing, and various permanent diseases of the nervous system. To believe this we are called upon to imagine that an imponderable matter which no one can see, feel, or touch, or acquire any notion of, except in its fantastic results of disarranging all the physiological laws of the animal economy, can remove, in defiance of the ordinary laws of absorption, effused blood or living structure, in any part of the body. It may be said that we have other imponderable elements, such as heat, light, and electricity, which perform physical effects equally striking with those claimed for Mesmerism. Let us give Animal Magnetism the full benefit of such analogies.

The imponderable elements are widely distinguished from Animal Magnetism by nothing more than this—that from their first origin the isolated phenomena are universally the same. Electricity, Terrestrial Magnetism, Heat, Light, Sound, &c. do not conduct themselves in different modes towards the same substances at different times—everything pertaining to them bears the impress of law and invariability, from the first moment the eye of science is thrown upon them. In fact our knowledge of all these imponderable agents, which we are only acquainted

with through their effects,—our knowledge of them, I repeat, is more certain and definite than even of the ponderable substances which we can see, taste, and handle. There is no exception to this rule, even in the more mysterious principle of life, or the nervous fluid; everything that we know of them is stamped with implacable order and regularity. Thus, compared with those things with which it is most comparable, “Mesmerism is an isolated and forlorn thing,” as it has been well termed by a most scientific physician of the day.

Having shown the improbability of the existence of such an agent as Mesmerism, I proceed to the question,—Will the phenomena admit of any more reasonable explanation? The first experiments by Mr. Spencer Hall, at the Public Rooms in this town, were intended to illustrate the effects of Mesmerism on the muscular tissues of the body.

The following were the states or conditions represented: first,—Spasm, rigidity or a fixed state of the muscles; secondly,—Catalepsy, the muscles being flexible, the body yielding to and retaining any given position; third,—Paralysis, or complete loss of voluntary power over the whole body. These conditions are all known to exist under certain forms of disease, and not unfrequently occur to the medical man.

In tetanus or locked jaw we have rigidity of the muscles,—Catalepsy manifests itself in some hysterical states of the system, and Paralysis will arise from local pressure on the brain or spinal cord,—other states of the muscular system more singular than those enumerated will sometimes occur in the course of medical experience ; for instance,—the Paralysis of one set of muscles, while their antagonists are in a state of tension. These several conditions of the muscular system, when the result of disease, prove oftentimes of a serious nature, and but little amenable to treatment ; now such being the case, the proofs well ascertained and daily attested by all medical men, how is it that the conditions just described can be produced artificially at the will of the operator, admitting that they are not simulated ? Rejecting, as absurd, the theory that the mesmeriser is able to radiate forth at will a magnetic fluid, and thus influence the persons around him, or another doctrine, equally preposterous, that the volition of one human being is capable of exercising a direct and independent influence over the minds and bodies of others, let us see if the subject will admit of any more satisfactory or reasonable explanation. The individual who places himself at the disposal of the mesmerist, and is weak enough to imagine that he must

act just as the operator intends, subjugates his will, for the time, to the mesmeriser ; hence, in the imagination of the patient, a considerable influence is felt, and many of the effects produced are by the mere force of imitation ; for instance,—in the first experiment of Mr. S. Hall, a boy was placed opposite to him, the boy's arm became rigid, the mesmerised knew from previous experiments that the lecturer wished this condition of the limb to take place, and consequently, by his own voluntary act, the arm assumed a rigid state, his fingers were opened and closed alternately by the operator, and a stick was then placed horizontally in his closed hand. The mesmeriser stood opposite to the patient and commenced an oscillatory movement of his closed hand, the patient commenced moving the stick in the same manner—at first slowly, afterwards more quickly. The body of the patient being at this time rigid, he next, at the suggestion of the operator, picked up a stick. These acts may be made intelligible upon the principles before suggested, the patient having, for the time, rendered his own will subservient to the will of the operator, and then, by mere imitation, following out his suggestions. On a subsequent evening, to prove that this was the case, by the wish of some of the gentlemen

present, the boy, previous to the experiment, was blindfolded ; the boy fell into real or feigned sleep ; the handkerchiefs were taken off, a large book was placed before his eyes, the operator then, on a signal being given by another gentleman, made his usual sign to the patient ; the patient not being able to see the manipulations of the operator, no effect followed, the boy remained with the stick in a quiescent state.

The next condition produced by the practisers of Mesmerism, is coma or sleep. Mr. Braid, a Surgeon of Manchester, asserts that there are many individuals, when made to direct their eyes for a few minutes to a particular point, become drowsy and gradually fall asleep, and he attributes this effect to the fatigue induced upon the visual organs, reflected upon the brain, and ending in coma or drowsiness. Now, admitting this to be the correct explanation, the phenomenon is by no means wonderful. Various are the modes, by which sleep may be artificially produced. A mother, by gentle patting, or friction, lulls her child to sleep,—the operation of brushing or cutting the hair, will induce sleep,—counting a series of numbers,—looking at space,—perfect abstraction of mind,—watching the trembling of leaves upon the trees,—listening to the ripple of a stream,—or any other mono-

tonous sight or sound, will produce the same effect. The kind of sleep, natural to each individual, of course varies considerably. Many persons, in their ordinary sleep, will answer questions—others go through certain ordinary or unusual acts, if partially aroused or excited. These acts may be all forgotten, or only partially remembered in the vigilant state; doubtless such cases are of ordinary occurrence. Is it then extraordinary that certain individuals of a nervous and susceptible temperament, after having been put artificially to sleep, should, in this sleep waking, half-conscious state, pass through a series of actions, under the guidance of the mesmeriser, at the same time influenced by music, or any other external stimulus.

In the second lecture given by Mr. Hall, a painter, named Day, submitted to some experiments. This man has partial paralysis of the hand, known by the term "wrist drop." After sleep had been induced, the lecturer attempted to cause rigidity of the arm and hand; but was unsuccessful. In answer to questions put, he stated that the arm felt stronger after the operation. This might have been the case, the sleep of a few minutes is refreshing to any one, and a short nap after the fatigues of the day, might have had an invigorating effect on

the man's arm, equally with other parts of the body. Mr. S. Hall told the patient that he had cured a person similarly affected, and if he would go to London, and submit to the process daily, he thought he could restore the paralysed limb. Does Mr. Hall believe that mesmeric passes over this man's arm will extract the lead which has insinuated itself into the system, and upon which the disease depends?

In the next lecture, a gentleman of the town came forward to be mesmerised. The attempts of the lecturer to induce sleep were perfectly unsuccessful, and the reason attributed by Mr. Hall was the determined spirit of the gentleman to resist the mesmeric influence. This was admitting, at all events, that the will of the patient had greatly to do with the question. Another gentleman then came forward—after a considerable time, at least twenty minutes, sleep was obtained. It was a late hour, and this gentleman appeared to be fatigued. It is not surprising, that after looking upward for twenty minutes, the retina should become wearied, dropping of the eyelids follow, and sleep result as a natural consequence. Excited by the manipulations of the lecturer, the limbs of this gentleman jerked repeatedly. Music also appeared to exert a certain influence over him; for when placed in the

erect posture, which Mr. Hall found considerable difficulty in effecting, the legs and feet were put slightly in motion. I feel assured, that there was a degree of irritation existing in the nervous system of this gentleman, which, on being thrown into a half conscious state, excited by external stimulants, as a current of air, touching the sensitive nerves of the hand, and friction of the arms, readily became developed. Slight contraction, or twichings of the limbs, are not an unfrequent occurrence in the natural sleep of some individuals. I am quite prepared to assert that there are individuals of so sensitive a temperament, that if the process were persisted in, they might be tickled to death.—How would the mesmerist explain this? By the mysterious agency of Mesmerism. The calm physiologist would say that the sentient nerves of the skin had been preternaturally excited and exhausted, that this condition was transmitted through them to the brain, and that depression and exhaustion of the nervous system was the result.

With regard to somnambulism, I believe the cases are rare in which this condition is manifested under the mesmeric or artificial sleep; of course when it does take place, it occurs in individuals of a peculiarly nervous organization and temperament, and such as whom under

predisposing and exciting causes, would fall naturally into the somnambulistic state. Many of those who have been the subjects of mesmeric operations, have been natural somnambulists. Mr. S. Hall, for instance, admits the younger boy on whom he performs his experiments, is a natural somnambulist. What is the opinion of physicians on this peculiar state? Somnambulism is considered by medical men of great authority, to be a morbid condition of the system, arising oftentimes from disordered states of the digestion, or determination of blood to the head. This morbid state, not unfrequently passes into disease of a severe character,—epilepsy,—melancholy,—or even madness. In persons predisposed, is it surprising that after they have fallen into a half conscious state, then excited and stimulated by external agents, and by the nervous influence of an excited imagination, the mind directed at the same time towards the mesmeriser,—that varied and sometimes singular actions should result?

I question much the propriety, or even safety, of exciting artificially a morbid state of the system, liable to pass into diseased conditions of a far more serious, and perhaps, incurable nature. But, in the experiments of Mr. Hall, on the younger boy, Wigston, was there any-

thing which could not be accounted for in a natural way, without resorting to such an agent as Mesmerism? Under the influence of music, the limbs and body were thrown into numerous varied and beautiful attitudes. Doubtless, the boy remembered having seen some similar exhibition, and from the integrity with which, each night of lecture, these same positions were effected, he was well aware of every thing he was doing. When he was about to run across the platform, he raised his eyelids to see where he was going. Experiments of this nature, repeatedly performed on the same individuals, afford no proof in favor of the existence of Mesmerism. The force of habit and imitation will lead such persons, when under the same influence, and exposed to similar exciting causes, to go through precisely the same series of acts.

Another objection to the doctrine of Mesmerism is the variety and multiplicity of the practices resorted to by its professors. Mesmer, the founder, adopted a very complicated method; his patients, connected by a rope, were placed around a tub pierced with a number of rods of iron, each patient held one of the iron rods, music was played, and the operator, with another rod of iron, manipulated the patients.

Abbé Faria, who succeeded Mesmer, per-

formed magnetisation, by placing his patient in an arm chair, and after telling him to shut his eyes, suddenly called out in a loud voice “Dormez,”—the effect of which was said to produce a slight shock, occasion warmth, sleep, and various other phenomena: while the mesmerists of more modern times place their patients before them, and stare into their eyes, using sundry imposing and grotesque manipulations.

These facts prove again the erroneous notion of an elastic or magnetic fluid emanating from the operator. They evidence that the effects produced are the result of the patient’s feelings and imaginations merely, and many persons in this state, allow themselves to be guided implicitly, at the will of the operator.

The mere fact that some of the mesmerists have been impious enough to compare the miraculous acts of the Prophets, Apostles, and of the Saviour of mankind Himself, with mesmerism, nay, to maintain that they are identical, is sufficient to condemn it.

Now, what coincidence can we discover, what resemblance between the manipulations of the mesmeriser, and the simple acts recorded in Holy Writ.

To refer, for instance, to the first miraculous act of the Apostles—the man here spoken of,

who had been lame from birth, and was thus suddenly and perfectly cured of his calamity, needed no preparation before the process of cure could be effected. No time or opportunity was afforded for influencing the mind, or affecting the body, of the diseased man in any way previous to his restoration. The lame man no sooner looked on Peter and John than the use of his limbs was restored.

It has often appeared to me that the most effectual way of annihilating this pseudo science, would be to admit the truth of the various extraordinary things which the accredited mesmerists profess themselves able to accomplish.

They declare that Mesmerism enables one person to acquire a paramount power over the mind and body of another, and I believe it is not maintained that the most virtuous are always endowed with the greatest mesmerising power. Now the mind revolts from the idea, that a virtuous man or woman may, with perfect unconsciousness on their parts, become entirely subjugated to the will of any ill or well intentioned person who may choose to use the mesmeric influence. If half of what Mr. Spencer Hall has written and said be true, he could, if he became an inmate of any house containing a party susceptible of the mesmeric influence, readily

obtain absolute control over them; he could make the party think what he pleased, and perform whatever muscular movements he desired: and all this without the party so affected knowing under whose, or what influence, he was acting! Now, there must be bad, as well as good men, among the mesmerisers; all men cannot be supposed to possess the fair intentions of Mr. Spence Hall. Let us carry this out to the fair issue, and it destroys freedom of the will, and moral responsibility. For how can an individual be responsible for thoughts introduced into his mind by another party, or for actions wrought under the entire control of some one, thus usurping power over him! Referring to supernatural things, we are assured that against satanic influence the good can obtain assistance from a higher power, but here, according to the showing of the mesmerists, is an agency which can be used for good or bad purposes, and entirely uncontrollable, directly or indirectly, by the party acted upon.

It may be said, in answer, that Mesmerism is intended for good, but like all other blessings, may be perverted to evil—granted, but not in like manner—medicines may be administered wrongly, and poison may be given from among medicinal substances, but tangible evidence of

the matter remains—the party offending may be punished—mischief may however be wrought by mesmerisers, according to the statements of its advocates, and no evidence remain of the crime. If the common sense of the whole community be ever brought to view this subject, it will most assuredly be placed within the circle of the law. It is now a punishable offence for an unprofessional person to administer a dose of opium sufficient to cause sleep, if there be any suspicion of evil intention; but a mesmerist may do this and more, he may raise the sleeping persons to irresponsible action, he, the mesmerist may, at his own will, put curses, or prayers, into his mouth, and if phreno-magnetism be true, he can, at his pleasure, excite lewd thoughts or benevolent aspirations in the mind—it may be retorted that if the thing is true, it cannot but be found ultimately on the side of virtue, I grant this, but I believe that on the mesmerists own showing, if their doctrine be not false, there is such an irresponsible power of evil, not confined to the individual but extended to all susceptible of mesmeric influence, if the professor chooses to exert it, that no amount of good can counterbalance it.

These varied considerations, taken conjointly, lead me to reject Mesmerism as altogether

false, in so far as it professes to be a new and distinct element, or power—and to believe that the propagation of its doctrines are mischievous to the community. We could not even desire to have a disease occasionally cured, or an operation sometimes performed without pain, at such a fearful cost as that I have specified. Mesmerism ought to be looked on as a moral poison, resembling some physical poison which the physician is too prudent to use, because its poisonous qualities are inseparable from the powers it may possess over disease—like other forms of falsehood, it will not bear the arguments that can be adduced against it, and the legitimate and logical developement of its principles are as dangerous to its existence, as open attacks. Treat it as truth or as falsehood, and its pretensions are equally evident.

